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THE PLACE OF AMERICAN HISTORY IN THE HIGH-SCHOOL COURSE¹

A COMPREHENSIVE treatment of the subject of American history in the high school involves a discussion of at least four practical questions: (1) In which year of the high-school course can American history most profitably be given? (2) How much time, all things considered, should be devoted to it? (3) What should be the scope and substance of the course? (4) How can it best be presented? Being impressed with the importance of the first question, and knowing the varying practices in regard to it, I shall devote my attention chiefly to this one.

It is believed that these inquiries properly stand in the order here given. The third one, dealing with the substance of the course, and the fourth, relating to method, cannot most intelligently be discussed, much less "settled," if indeed any settlement is possible or even desirable, until it has been determined *when* the work is to be given and how much time is to be devoted to it; for, obviously, if American history is to be given in the first year to immature students fresh from the grammar school, the course cannot have the same scope and content as if given in the fourth year to students who have added three years of age and maturity since leaving the eighth grade. Neither, for similar reasons, can the course be given by the same methods; for, though fundamentally all methods of teaching history may properly be the same, yet in externals at least they must differ greatly to be adapted to students as widely separated in age and capacity as are first year and fourth year high-school pupils. Dr. John Dewey says that method in its last analysis is "reducible to the question of the order of development of the child's powers and interests. The law of presenting and treating material is the law implicit in the child's own nature."²

¹ A paper read before the Interscholastic History Conference, at Madison, Wis., June 1, 1901. The general discussion was on the whole question of "American History in the High School."

² Quoted by Professor J. I. JEGI, in the *Journal of Adolescence*, Vol. I, No. 5, p. 180.

There seems to be little ground for controverting this opinion, and its application here is direct. A pupil who has but recently left the grammar school at twelve years of age is immature. Imagination and memory for concrete facts, to be sure, are about at their zenith, but the powers of critical comparison and abstract reasoning are comparatively undeveloped. He is in the acquisitive stage, with more interest in the dramatic forms of fact and episode than in their true historical meaning. But three years of growth make of him a very different unit of mentality. His interests, powers, and habits of thought are now on a higher plane; they must be appealed to by different means, and in turn they lead to different ends. Methods and scope, in other words, in American history as in any other subject, are conditioned by its place in the course.

If, then, the matter of the place in the course claims priority, and upon it there is not already some degree of uniformity in practice in high schools, it clearly seems to demand full and careful discussion. I believe it has important claims to priority, for the reasons above suggested; and facts show that upon it there is the widest possible variance in practice.

In response to ninety circulars sent out to accredited high schools of Wisconsin, sixty-seven replies were received in time for use in preparing this paper. One question asked was: "In what year of the course is American history given?" The returns show that the time ranges from the first to the fourth year—one school giving it in the first, forty-one in the second, twelve in the third, seven in the fourth, and five in the third and fourth, while one gives no American history at all beyond the grammar department. Taking these results to be representative, as I think they are, the showing is that somewhat less than two-thirds of the accredited schools in Wisconsin give the American history course in the second year, about one fifth in the third year, one tenth in the fourth, and nearly as many in the third and fourth.

While in a general way the larger schools put the American history latest, yet the above division does not appear to follow any clear classification of the schools on the basis of size, course,

instructional force, nor other visible conditions. For in one list we find towns large and small,^{*} like Arcadia and Janesville, Durand and Fond du Lac, Clintonville and Stevens Point, Augusta and Merrill. In another list stand Mayville and Sheboygan. In the same list we find schools accredited for every course the university offers, and others that are accredited for but the agricultural and English courses. A school employing one assistant to the principal stands beside another employing nine. One in which history is taught by a normal graduate who may not have studied American history since leaving the high school, stands beside one in which the subject is taught by a man who first graduated from a normal school, then entered the University of Wisconsin where he took the civic-historical course, and finally took two years of graduate work in history. Thus the basis of division according to practice is extremely obscure.

Outside of Wisconsin there is as little unity of practice as within. The *Report of the Committee of Seven* shows that about one half of the schools of the country at large put American history late in the course, after general or European history; while the other half put it early in the curriculum, before European. Their statement of conditions is as follows:

(1) About one third of the schools follow the chronological method, taking up in succession ancient history, general history, and modern history in some form, usually English, or American, or both; that is they use general history as a bridge between ancient times and our modern nations. (2) A much smaller number of schools, perhaps a seventh of the whole, prefer the order: general, ancient, and modern; that is, first of all, a survey of the whole field and then more detailed study, first of the ancient period, then of the modern. This method is apparently less common in New England than in the West. (3) The third method begins with American, or sometimes with English history, and then takes general history, bringing in ancient history last. About one fifth of the schools reporting use this system, which is least common in the middle states, and which would seem to be devised to bring ancient history into a place convenient for college examinations. (4) A fourth method, which prevails in more than a quarter of the schools, is that of

^{*}The population of these places according to the last census is, given in order, 1273, 13,185; 1458, 15,110; 1653, 9524; 1256, 8537; 1815, 22,956. *Census Bulletin No. 54, February 7, 1901.*

beginning with American, following with ancient history, and ending with a general course; that is, they proceed from the particular to the general.¹

The lines of classification are dim here also. In short, there seems to be wide variations of practice in the matter everywhere, based on no visible differences in the condition of the different schools.

If, then, we are to discuss the scope and the method of presenting American history in the high school, we must either adapt our discussion to a shifting and indefinite basis or else come to some sort of a conclusion as to the time when the course can be most profitably given, and then, from this as a starting point consider the other questions.

I shall begin my contribution by a statement of my own conviction, namely, that American history in the high school should follow European history if any is given, and in any case should be as late in the course as possible, preferably in the fourth year, assuming no increase in the average amount of time devoted to history and no change from the present custom of five exercises per week, which, if practicable, would offer some advantages. I shall support my position by little that is new, but shall to a considerable extent restate arguments that have been given or suggested before in substance if not in form. If the arguments are tenable or the conclusion an accepted commonplace, we are justified in going over the ground with the hope that reiteration may help to bring practice into correspondence with opinion. If they are not tenable they are presented for criticism and correction.

The time when American history is to be given in the high school is conditioned to a large extent by the other history work the pupil has had, or is to get in the high-school course. The facts are that all students get more or less American history before they reach the high school. Most elementary schools give American biography extensively through the grades, while in the grammar department they give from eighteen to thirty-six weeks of regular American history with a text-book. These facts, as the *Report of the Committee of Seven* (p. 38) suggests,

¹*Report of the Committee of Seven, History in Schools*, pp. 140, 141.

satisfy the demand made by some that in teaching history we should begin with the familiar and near and proceed to the new and remote. But far more important, they furnish a positive argument for putting American history late in the high-school course whether American history alone is to be studied there, or European history is to be studied also.

1. Let us suppose that American history only is to be given. If this is given for the last time in the early years of the course the student must pursue it with little advance of mental strength since last he studied it; and as substance and method are both conditioned by the learner's mind, the course must be to a large degree similar in breadth, content, and method to the work done in the grammar school. It becomes essentially a 'review with the purpose of a review left out, a process which has not the highest educational value. If, then, only American history is to be included in the high school, in proportion as the final course comes late in the curriculum, in that degree will the student be able to bring to it greater maturity and new powers; developed reason and judgment supplementing memory, interest in facts for their content supplanting that for their dramatic form, power to generalize enhancing and raising the plane of interest in particulars; in that degree will the work become a *new view* rather than a *review* in the ordinary sense; and to that extent may the course consist of new and richer materials selected from wider sources, and worked into higher forms of thought product by more complex processes of study. Better, I should say, shift some other fourth year study, that offers entirely new interests and is to be taken but once, back to the second year, and put American history in its place, than to go over American history earlier than the third year. Better yet, if only one course is to come in the high school, and this must come in the second year, strengthen the grammar-school course and make that in the high school European rather than American history. Indeed, if only one year's history work is to be done in the high school, I think, since considerable American history work has been already done, that no matter in what year it is put, the purposes of culture and general intelligence may possibly be

better served by making it European history, or by combining English and American history according to the suggestions of the *Report of the Committee of Seven* on page 43. But in any case, if only American history be given in the high school and it is all to be given in one year, this final view should come late in the course if for no other reason than to admit of a lapse of time for mental growth after the grammar-school work, in order that the highest total good may be gained.

2. The case is even stronger when we start with the other assumption, that both European and American history be given in the high-school course. This assumption corresponds with the facts in the large majority of cases. Most high schools of good standing in every state give in addition to the American history, a year or more of non-American history, under the heads of general; ancient and English; or ancient, mediæval and modern history. That this should precede American history seems unquestionable, if alone on the grounds of chronological and logical sequence. And on purely psychological grounds the argument is even stronger. Apperceptively considered, a knowledge of American history must be insufficient unless based on some knowledge of the world's history. American history did not begin with John Smith nor with Christopher Columbus. This the student must not only know in the sense of having read or heard it so stated, but he must realize it by having come in touch with the history of other nations that contributed to the making of America. He must see the fundamental institutions of America in their relation to the history of mankind. In the words of one of the masters¹ "the political history of the American people can be rightly understood only when it is studied in connection with that general process of evolution which has been going on from the earliest times, and of which it is itself one of the most important and remarkable phases. . . . As the town meetings of New England are lineally descended from the village assemblies of the Aryans; as our huge federal union was long ago foreshadowed in the little leagues of Greek cities, and Swiss cantons; so the great political problem

¹ JOHN FISKE, *American Political Ideas*, Preface, pp. 6, 7.

which we are . . . solving, is the very same problem upon which all civilized peoples have been working ever since civilization began. . . . When thus considered our American history acquires added dignity and interest. When viewed in this light, moreover, not only does American history become especially interesting to Englishmen, but English history [and we may add world history] is clothed with fresh interest for Americans." In short, American development is the crowning work of a great part of human development. And in order that this may be in any sense realized, American history should be the culmination of any history course in American schools.

3. There is another consideration that is of no little weight. It is that the most intensive history course given should be the last, and that American history forms the best basis for such advanced forms of historical study as are possible with high-school classes.

Advanced history work must be done late in the course because of its difficulty. No study in the curriculum requires a higher order of powers than does a study of history by methods calculated to derive from it its true content, an introduction to which should in this day be the privilege of the student before he leaves the "people's college." To such work there must be brought power to assimilate, without distraction, reading far wider than the text. There must be training in the use of books, in patient search for facts, discrimination in their selection, and judgment in their classification and interpretation. All this is necessary to make even a beginning in truest historical study; and all this demands a maturity that is not usually attained before the fourth high-school year.

As a basis for such work in American schools, American history furnishes materials more accessible, more abundant, and more intelligible than does English or other European history. I found, for example, through my questionnaire, that two thirds of the accredited high-school libraries in Wisconsin contain full or nearly complete sets of the American Commonwealth series and the American Statesmen series. These alone are a rich collection on American biography and local history. Few if

any of the libraries have parallel sets equally useful and extensive on as limited a field of European history. Indeed, none such are available to ordinary high schools. And even if they were possessed, they would be found less suitable for the purposes. To use detailed material, even secondary, for historical purposes, one needs a certain apperceptive background, gained through life experience, to give orientation into the life of the country studied. This the student has of American life, but seldom of European life at the high-school age. And when it comes to original sources, these for Europe in the first place are not accessible to high schools in abundance; and for any but recent times they are to a large extent unintelligible to the average high-school student except under the most careful guidance. American history materials, therefore, are more plentiful, accessible, and usable, and therefore more suitable for such intensive work as high-school students may have time to do. For this reason the American history course should be given at a time when the student is best able to do advanced work, which is not till late in the course.

It may be added in this connection that, other things being equal, it is perhaps less essential in preparation for American citizenship, that a minute knowledge of European than of American history be possessed.

4. Opinion is on the side of this position. This is the recommendation of the Committee of Seven¹ who speak with authority. In my inquiries in this state I found that many who are giving American history in the second or even the third year believe it should be given later. Of the forty-one schools in which it is studied in the second year, only eighteen of the principals are satisfied with its place. Nineteen express a positive opinion that it should be placed later; three are undecided; and one gives no answer to this question. Of the sixty-six schools giving American history, forty-four principals, just two thirds, positively think that it should be later than the second year. Of these, fifteen voted for the fourth year, fifteen for the third or fourth, and fourteen for the third. It is important to

¹ *Report*, pp. 36, 37.

note in this connection that some of these men are principals whose interests are scientific or classical. Others are devotees of European rather than American history. All have the interests of the whole curriculum at heart. This illustrates a strong feeling in Wisconsin in favor of the position taken. Of thought elsewhere, the oft quoted Committee of Seven reports "an investigation of existing conditions leads us to believe that there is a strong tendency to place American history in the last year of the course."

To summarize the considerations thus far :

The place where American history is to appear in the course claims priority for discussion because other questions hinge upon it to a large degree, because there seems to be a baseless variation in practice, and because the dominant practice seems to be contrary to the best teachings and opinions.

It is believed that American history should come after European history if any is given, and in any case late in the course, preferably the fourth year, because, first, American history is extensively studied below the high school ; second, to take it again and for the last time in the early years of the course would not be so profitable in total results as if given later ; third, when European history is to be given, the laws of chronological and logical sequence and the psychology of apperception dictate that it should precede American history ; fourth, American history furnishes a better basis than European for such intensive history work as may be given, which should come late in the course because of the high order of powers it involves ; fifth, opinion here and elsewhere, not by any means confined to American history specialists, favors putting the American history as late in the course as possible.

In conclusion, the hopeful consideration to anyone who takes this position is that a large part of what is asked can be gained without colliding with science, English, Latin, or with any other interest. Most of the better schools give both European and American history. Such have only to change the order of the two to put American history on a much higher plane than it at present occupies. All that has gone before has

been based on the assumption that only the present amount of time be devoted to history. What would seem a strong presumption in favor of both plenty of time for history and also for a choice place for it in the course is the fact that a dominant current of thought is today along historical and sociological channels. The historical method of inquiry pervades every other subject. Interest in history is becoming widespread, and that in our own country's history especially so. This is evidenced by the fact that American history has a much better place in the school curriculum than it had a decade ago. Indeed, this interest has been forced upon us by the nature of our current problems which lie so largely in civic, economic and sociologic lines. It is being recognized that fitness to cope with these problems can come only to a conservative, historical-minded and enlightened public, who not only can see need of reform, but who also understand the process and laws of institutional growth. It is being recognized that one of the most practical and useful forms of equipment that can be given a maturing person just ready to enter into the duties of active citizenship, is a knowledge of how our American institutions came to be, as a clue to knowing whither they are tending. It is recognized that this can come only with an intelligent and considerable study of American history. It is not too much to hope that this recognition will be reflected in the school course both in the amount and the disposition of the time devoted to this subject.

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